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First teaching cycle:
Seeking and using feedback from students
Overview of the module

My first teaching cycle was carried out during the delivery of the compulsory subject module, Business Law & Practice. I share teaching of this module with two colleagues and am responsible for the Company Law element, which is taught over sixteen sessions, being LGS/SGS 11 to 18. (See "Personal Commentary" for further information on module delivery). All students have now been introduced to some elements of business law, but for many this module is their first encounter with both the concept of the company and to the Companies Acts legislation.

Rationale and aims

In common with many new lecturers, I wanted to establish how I was getting on as a teacher. Acutely aware of the fact that "expertise in an area does not guarantee that one can effectively teach others about that area" (Bransford, Brown and Cocking, 2000, p. 49), I am conscious that, as a qualified solicitor with a number of years of professional experience in practice, I may now be divorced from clear comprehension of the difficulties LPC students face in developing a new set of skills and knowledge in readiness for practice. I therefore wanted to elicit feedback from them on what they found difficult to grasp, as well as to provide alternative methods of exploring topics they identify as difficult for them. This feedback would include allowing them the opportunity to explain to and learn from their peers in small group discussions.

The aims of my first teaching intervention were therefore:

• to enable me to benchmark my own teaching ability and performance in class;
• to allow my students to assess for themselves areas of difficulty;
• to clarify problem topics by setting aside class time for additional discussion, including peer-to-peer explanation.
Brief review of the literature

Classroom assessment techniques (CAT) have been designed to allow teachers the benefit of obtaining instantaneous feedback from students in the classroom and have been trialled in numerous higher education environments (Angelo and Cross, 1993). They have proved to be a worthwhile method of carrying out a simple evaluation of student learning, including in legal education (e.g. Gillespie, 2005). CATs are learner-centred, formative and mutually beneficial, focusing on improving the students’ own process of learning and understanding and providing the tutor with information to assist in that process. They are also teacher directed and context specific, allowing an individual lecturer to adopt the approach most suited to their style and subject. CATs involve a “feedback loop” through which teachers can elicit the concerns of students and respond directly to them in the classroom. (Angelo and Cross, 1993)

An elegant and simple CAT, the "Muddiest Point" of the lecture, was developed by Mosteller (1989). In order to develop an informal feedback system, students were asked to take a couple of minutes at the end of the lecture to write down an answer to the questions, "What was the most important point in the lecture?"; "What was the muddiest point in today’s lecture?"; "What would you like to hear more about?". The papers were collected in and responses prepared for the students. Students responded well to the technique, and the lecturer was provided with more concrete information than simply asking, orally, if anyone has any questions (Mosteller, 1989).

The teaching intervention

I sought feedback from students using the "muddiest point" technique: at the end of the large group (lecture) session, I asked students to note down on a post-it note the point they had found the most difficult to grasp. After the session, I reviewed the comments and reflected on alternative ways to explain the topics identified.
At the start of the following small group (workshop) session (which anyway dealt with the same topics in greater depth), I set aside time to deal with the muddy points. Introducing all of the muddy points to the whole class by writing them on the whiteboard and running through the areas of concern which had been identified, I then instigated small group peer discussion. Some students who had grasped the topic were thus given the opportunity to deepen their understanding by explaining the concept to peers. All students should have completed the prescribed reading on the topic, therefore enabling the weaker students to clarify further any areas of uncertainty. Having observed the discussion which took place, I then took the opportunity to provide a further, alternative explanation of each concept with examples in practice.

Implementation of the teaching intervention

I had anticipated an excellent uptake: here was an opportunity for my students to let me know what they really thought of my lectures and workshops. However, at the end of the first session, LGSII, I received feedback from fewer than half of the students; at the end of LGS12 I received none at all. I requested feedback again during SGS12: two students responded. Given the limited number of responses I was receiving, I set aside seeking feedback over the next few sessions, waiting until the week before the mock exam to try once more. Again, I received only a limited number of written responses (nine in total), with the general oral feedback being that everything was clear and students did not feel the need to go over any particular topics again. A summary of the muddiest point feedback received during the teaching cycle is attached in the table at Appendix 2.

Following the first session, when the Companies Act legislation was introduced (to some students for the first time) students expressed concern over the complexity of the current position due to the partial implementation of a new act, with piecemeal repeal of existing provisions. In recognition of the particular difficulties of grasping an unfamiliar area of law during a transitional phase, I prepared a guide to "Surviving the Companies Act 2006", containing information regarding the relationship
between the old and the new legislation, and the timetable for implementation and repeal. I sought to clarify these issues at the beginning of the second session and directed students to the additional resource which I had posted on Blackboard, as well as sending out an email to all students. The other issues raised by students were dealt with by a series of questions, posed to the class as a whole, to generate peer discussion and explanation in pairs/small groups, followed by a class-wide facilitated discussion to clarify any continuing areas of difficulty.

After SGS13 I was asked whether students needed to know section numbers for the exam, highlighting to me the approach of those students who are concerned not with developing a toolkit of skills for their long-term future in the legal profession, but with the short-term necessity of passing exams. I dealt with this query by drawing to their attention the practical focus of this course and the importance of providing good legal advice to clients. Knowing where to find the law (Le. being able to refer to section numbers in an open book exam) is a vital skill in ensuring accurate advice and avoiding professional negligence claims. The concerns regarding shares were again dealt with through a focussed peer discussion around a number of questions posed on the whiteboard.

The feedback received in SGS 15 was at once understandable, reassuring, worrying and frustrating. The problem raised with regard to "understanding what law is in force and where to look - is there a list that clarifies what is in force and when it is in force?" was my revelation that students can simply switch off and fail to receive information: I was being asked this question, despite highlighting its importance and sending an email to all students directing them to the additional materials which had been made available on Blackboard. I patiently directed them again to the information I had posted a month ago.

A number of students were still concerned about the topic of shares and shareholders, despite comprehensive exercises, explanations and peer discussions in class time. In response to this therefore, and to aid revision in advance of the mocks, I posted some "quiz" questions on Blackboard to assist students in focussing their
minds on the key elements. I also discussed the issue with one student in particular who did comment that she does in fact understand the topic, but finds it difficult.

One student raised the question "Why is regulation necessary?" which indicated to me an inability to grasp the fundamentals of the concept of companies and also a failure to move beyond an undergraduate "but why is it like this?" attitude, to one of applying the law to "real" situations. This attitude is worrying for someone who hopes to be in practice and advising clients within the year. I dealt with this issue by asking students to consider a number of practical effects of the Companies Acts, thereby illustrating its necessity, such as the protection of members of the public, or shareholders in a company, from unscrupulous company directors.

Evaluation

At the end of the teaching cycle, I sought feedback on the whole of the "muddy point" exercise in the form of a short questionnaire handed out in class (see Appendix 3). Students were asked how useful they found the opportunity to reflect on the areas of difficulty, as well as the various methods I had adopted for clarifying those areas. The questionnaire also asked for any other comments on the usefulness of the "post-it note" exercise in clarifying areas of difficulty. Thirty-two out of thirty-five students completed the evaluation questionnaire (Appendix 4).

A summary of the responses is presented as a chart in Figure 1. Of those who responded, a large majority of students (78%) found the opportunity to reflect on problem topics very or fairly useful, with only a handful (9%) stating that they did not use it. In terms of clarification of areas of difficulty, the opportunity to discuss difficult topics with peers was very or fairly useful for most of the class (81%), with one student saying they did not use it. The vast majority (87.5%) found my explanations very or fairly useful; one student found my explanation not very useful, and, confusingly, one said they did not use them. Fewer students found the information regarding the legislation "in force" to be as useful: the legislation guide was very or fairly useful to 37.5% students and a notable proportion of students
(17%, n=6) found the legislation guide not very or not at all helpful. Only one said they did not use it. The quiz was popular: of those who used it (72%, n=23) all found it very useful, fairly useful or OK. A notable number, however, did not use it (28%, n=9).

Some additional comments were offered, as follows:

- Good to have "in force" sheet.
- Would be good to get model answers in SGSs instead of on BB.
- Prefer tutor to discuss answers group by group instead of with whole group.
- I hope lectures are carried out a bit more slowly as I find it difficult to cope at times.
- Good and well explained at the beginning of lessons.
- My questions were not addressed.

![Student evaluation of the "usefulness" of methods of clarifying the "muddiest point"

Figure 1

Conclusions

In the format implemented in this teaching cycle, I am unconvinced by this method for obtaining feedback from students. Although the majority did participate at some
point, and found the responses to the feedback useful, few students actually took the opportunity to advise me of their muddiest point after every session. On reflection, I suggest there may be a number of reasons for this outcome:

- At the end of a session students have had enough and simply want to leave the room. To that end I tried requesting feedback mid-session, but again very few responded;
- In a small cohort students are unwilling to reveal areas of weakness;
- An immediate request for feedback is too overwhelming: students need time to digest the new material and reflect on it themselves before they are able to identify which areas are of concern to them.
- The manner in which they were asked to give feedback may have been inappropriate. I asked students to identify areas of difficulty. Asking about areas of clarity may have created a more positive space for reflection, encouraging the students to then consider areas of weakness and disclose them.
- Students really do believe they have grasped the subject. However, this confidence was not reflected in their performance in the mock assessment for Business Law & Practice.
- Students may have been unsure about the goal of the exercise. I had asked for their feedback to help me to understand whether I was explaining things adequately. Perhaps I could beyond this to explain that this also their opportunity to revisit topics which are not clear to them.

On the face of it, my students lack metacognition, failing to recognise that their current understanding is inadequate for the task in hand (Bransford et al., 2000). This capacity is not only important to these students as post-graduate learners already relatively advanced in their subject, but will become increasingly important to them in terms of their approach to solving client problems as they develop expertise in legal practice. In particular, "winging it" may lead to serious consequences in terms of professional negligence.
To determine whether this teaching intervention was a success I return to the stated aims, which were:

- to enable me to benchmark my own teaching ability and performance in class;
- to allow my students to assess for themselves areas of difficulty;
- to clarify problem topics by setting aside class time for additional discussion, including peer-to-peer explanation.

In terms of the first and third aims, I am satisfied by the results of my evaluation and have gained confidence in my ability to convey complex topics to my students and to provide them with the opportunity to explore alternative ways of deepening their own understanding, such as peer discussion and additional exercises (the quiz). I was disappointed to note that one student felt that their questions had not been addressed, since I had taken the time to address in one form or another, all the questions which arose. However, I am not satisfied that students are able to identify for themselves their own areas of weakness which was the second aim. Limited numbers of students came forward with a muddy point, and many believed that they had understood everything in the lecture. I am interested in exploring this misperception, and the need for metacognition in the development of professional competence, in my second and third teaching cycles.